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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/28/2018

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: IEC: IMAGE AND PUBLIC OUTREACH NEED IMPROVEMENT

REF: A. KABUL 2548

[1](#)B. KABUL 2575

Classified By: Alan Yu, Reasons 1.5 b and d

[1](#)1. (C NF) A senior strategic communications expert with experience in advising heads of state visited Afghanistan September 14 to 26 to consult with the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) on ways to improve the IEC's public image, media operations, and voter outreach. Hosted by UNDP/ELECT, Australian Toby Ralph (strictly protect) found that civil society and media representatives see the IEC as little-known but dubiously independent. The close political relationship between IEC president Dr. Azizullah Lodin and President Karzai (ref A) is the principal cause of questions over the organization's impartiality.

[1](#)2. (C NF) The IEC's "very shoddy" public relations department does nothing to help this image and may have worsened it, Ralph says. The IEC president's startling and extemporaneous public statements appear against the backdrop of a press operation that is unskilled, unmotivated, and, all too often, "slumped in front of the TV." The staff's inexperience and disorganization has alienated media representatives, as the set-up of press events changes mercurially and journalists' deadlines go unmet. Organizational and procedural reforms could easily improve the media shop, Ralph says, although finding a talented and suitable spokesperson will be a key, difficult challenge.

[1](#)3. (C NF) As for outreach to voters, Ralph considers the IEC's work to date "very limited." The IEC itself tells him it is most likely to make contact with urban voters rather than the still-sizable rural population. The IEC's radio and TV spots (ref B) have begun to appear on air, and Ralph is hopeful that the IEC program of outreach activities will soon be more effective. He recommended that the IEC develop cooperative relationships with the Ministry of Haj and Waqif and the Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs, so that local religious and tribal leaders can complement the work of the 1,500 local civic educators now on the ground. UNDP may also encourage one of the two female commissioners to represent the IEC at media events, to attract women voters. Ralph also suggested the IEC begin to engage broadly with civil society organizations, looking past the immediate issue of voter registration to the elections in 2009.

14. (C NF) Ralph claims the Taliban is telling ordinary Afghans that voting is a sin against Islam. In his view, the IEC as an organization is nowhere near ready to counter the message. Comment: Post will work with UNDP, IFES, and other USAID partners to review the consultant's report and encourage the IEC to implement needed changes. The IEC's present failings in managing its image and voter outreach matter because of their potential impact on voter participation and popular perceptions of the legitimacy of the elections. On September 27 IEC president Lodin, seated among his fellow commissioners, admitted to POLCONS that the media operation needs improvement. End comment.  
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